

The “Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies” Project (1)

Nadya Foty and Andriy Nahachewsky
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Introduction

The Peter and Doris Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore at the University of Alberta is in the process of concluding a project with several partners to record some 900 hours involving 2,000 interviews with people who remember life on the Canadian prairies prior to 1939. The project is called “Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies” At the time of this writing, most of the interviews have been conducted but the compilation, coding, analysis and description of findings are still underway. For this reason, this essay takes the form of a personal perspective of the project, description of issues influencing project design, and a statement of aspirations rather than an authoritative reporting of its results.

The aim of the project has been to document everyday life, ethnic identity and regional variation among people of Ukrainian, French, German and English heritage.(2) How did people from diverse backgrounds interact, adapt and become “prairie Canadians” in the first half of the twentieth century? What was the relationship between cultural inheritance and local community participation? How did they express their various identities on the local community level? What factors affected regional variation in these communities? The project is designed to generate a great deal of documentary information and primary archival resources for further research in many aspects of these people’s lives.

Ethnographic research about ethnicity, integration and Canadianization as social processes in a given period is perhaps best conducted indirectly. In this project, these topics are studied as embedded in the sphere of informal cultural life in the local context. Local informal culture, often referred to as “vernacular culture,” includes family life, personal relations, customs, traditions, expressive culture, occupational lore and recreation. Vernacular culture operates on a level that is usually less explicitly ideological than official organizational activity. Studying this cultural sphere allows for a discussion of people’s cultural experiences and interethnic relations from a more neutral, elastic and holistic perspective.

Since vernacular culture in itself is a very broad sphere, the project's focus is further narrowed to four categories: ritual expressions, material culture, verbal traditions and performance arts. These categories of activity are recognized as key markers of ethnic communities. At the same time they are very flexible and responsive to contextual factors. Interethnic relations (maintenance of cultural boundaries, borrowing, integration) often manifest themselves actively here. These four categories are also pervasive enough that they are researchable in every local community and likely with every interviewee.

Challenges

Research on ethnicity through vernacular culture facilitates the inclusion of a wide range of individuals, including those who had strong identification with their ethnic inheritance, people with multiple heritages, and others whose ethnic background impacted their lives minimally. Whereas many studies of ethnic culture deal with connections between the Diaspora communities and culture in the land of origin, emphasis in this project will be on variation by location in Canada. It is expected that a complex relationship will be demonstrated between ethnic identification and Canadianization; the two are not always inversely related.

People who remember the first half of the twentieth century are now 70-80 years old or older. When they retell their parents' or grandparents' stories, vivid descriptions of personal experiences are sometimes passed on orally from 1900 or earlier. Nevertheless, challenges have been raised that oral sources "... do not necessarily conform to western measures of reliability and accuracy." This criticism is most often and most importantly raised to oral history projects that claim to make generalizations about broader cultural processes, rather than those that focus on qualitative descriptions of their particular case studies.

In this instance, the *Local Culture* project attempts to link the thick description of specific cases with ventures into the "dangerous waters" of exploring sociological patterns. Because of these dual perspectives, we think the *Local Culture* project may be of some value to scholars critiquing ethnographic methodology. Two challenges are dealt with here.(3) On the one hand, questions of *reliability* can refer to general claims about cultural processes made on the basis of oral histories. This challenge may most characteristically be voiced by sociologists, who have developed elaborate methodological tools to evaluate reliability of

certain types of research claims. Other questions about our type of project may refer to the *accuracy* of the interviewee's memory, considering the filtering influences of memory, the desire to please the interviewer, and other factors. This challenge may be called "the historian's challenge," since historians have established disciplinary expertise in evaluating the veracity of their sources.

In response to these issues, we isolated four groups of factors that might bias the stories told during an interview. The first group of factors relates to the identity of the interviewee, and includes gender, economic status, personality and mood. Health and memory are extremely influential factors in interviews.(4) Telling a story about oneself can be an active means of projecting one's contemporary self-image.

A second group of factors is connected with the identity of the interviewer.(5) The interviewee may choose to present her narratives differently to a person she knows well, and differently to a stranger. The gender of the interviewer may also be significant; different combinations may encourage different stories. Likewise, events described to an interviewer the same age as the interviewee may well differ from those that are thought appropriate for a younger audience. A talkative interviewer might elicit different memories and reactions than one who listens quietly. He may help the interviewee feel comfortable to reciprocate and express herself flowingly. On the other hand, he may also set a precedent in topic or style that the interviewee then emulates. An interviewee may well be affected by what she thinks the interviewer wants to hear.(6) Further, it may prove significant if the interviewer and interviewee share the same ethnicity or not. Silent or not-so-silent audience members during the interview may include spouses, children or friends of the interviewee. Sometimes stories may be told specifically with these people in mind.

A third group of factors that might influence interview content relates to the interview procedure itself. If the interview is a conversation between two trusted friends, it will be very different than a dialogue between two new acquaintances. Certainly, the interview format affects the information that is collected in a variety of ways (structured questionnaire, semi-structured interview, unstructured conversation, etc).(7) The location of the interview might also affect the interchange and the comfort level for both parties. Unexpected factors may influence the mood and tone of the day. The language used during the interview also has the potential to affect the experiences that are remembered and the strategies used in their description.

A fourth group of factors that can affect the interview content significantly are those experiences that have taken place during the intervening years. If the interviewee has moved out of the locality that is being described, it is likely that her memory of it is more abstracted; she can more easily hyperbolize the negative or the idyllic character of her earlier community life, depending on her mood. On the other hand, she is less likely to commingle events from earlier and more recent times. Traumatic experiences such as the death of a spouse may color the memories of the period under study. Changes in economic and social status might move the interviewee to remember circumstances in the early period as richer or poorer, happier or sadder than they might have been remembered otherwise.

Other factors may also come into play. It is not likely that all significant factors can be identified, and certainly they cannot be controlled. Perhaps in time we can observe the influence of certain biasing factors and take them into consideration when interpreting the interviewees' narratives.

Coda

Questions of reliability and accuracy are legitimately asked of oral history projects, and interview-based ethnographic researchers do well to consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of their approach. Strengths of oral histories include the directness and potential power of the case studies explored. They can foreground the perceptions of the participants in a holistic context. Projects have the best potential if they strive for specific descriptions of situations and events directly experienced by the narrator. Generalizations by the interviewee, on the other hand, can perhaps best be used to understand emic perceptions. If these projects include goals that go beyond specific case studies and try to shed light on more general social processes, they benefit greatly from a large quantity of information and reinforcement through interconnections with related sources.

As ethnographers, we benefit when we recognize the exploratory nature of our chosen research method. We can rarely make claims to *prove* larger social processes outright, but our greatest contribution is typically to *suggest* lines of thought that can open doors to further ideas, and follow up research if desired. Besides providing insights into the vernacular culture of people who lived on the prairies in the past, the project "Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies," involving hundreds

of related case studies, can hopefully shed some light on methodological differences between ethnographic practice and other social science traditions.

Methods Used for Collecting Oral Histories

Three main approaches were used for interviews for the *Local Culture* project. The first approach was to ask a standard list of questions. Interview themes included material culture, ritual activities, songs and stories, performing arts, language use, social life and pastimes (see Appendix). Questions tended to be open rather than closed, to stimulate personal memories and narratives. Interviewers could ask supplementary questions to flesh out answers, and to allow for interviewee-initiated flexibility as required. The questionnaire was typically completed in 40-90 minutes. Responses provided a baseline of information that could be compared across localities, across ethnic groups, and across other variables.

The second approach was to collect more in-depth “life stories” from approximately 40% of the interviewees. These interview sessions varied from 2-15 hours in length (perhaps over several days), documenting the general lived and remembered experience of the person in question. Interviewers strove to record a free-flowing monologue or conversation, starting with a request for the interviewee to tell her life story. The interviewer attempted to be attentive to themes that the interviewee was particularly interested in and knowledgeable about. Topics and their connections were selected by the interviewee.

The third approach was an exploration of the family photograph collection. Historical photographs were a striking and rich medium for researchers of vernacular culture. Interviewees who were willing to share their photograph collections were encouraged to show them to the researcher, identify their contents and to reminisce about the subject matter. This approach focused on visual and material documents that might complement the verbal images communicated through the first two approaches.

Both during and following the collection phase of the project, fieldworkers were required to process the interviews according to a series of standard tasks: first, pertinent administrative and biographical information would be recorded in an interview report, including a range of 52 fields such as when the informant’s parents were born, locales in which they lived prior to 1939 and since, and if anyone else was present

during the interview. These interview reports would then be inputted into a master log of interviews. The fieldworker was also responsible for supplying an interview index, where a time code would be ascribed to each question asked during the interview, thus giving a virtual roadmap of the session itself. Most of the interviews were recorded on cassette and minidisk, therefore digitization and conversion of the interview to digital format was necessary. This would be uploaded to computer, along with any photographs that had been taken. Next, each fieldworker was expected to keep a fieldwork journal, recording any additional thoughts, reflections and/or information relevant to the project. Finally, the fieldworker had the organizational task of numbering each photo, sound file, index, and any other corresponding documents.

Near the conclusion of the collection phase, project management had to administer the depositing of all associated media and text files into a central repository, namely the *Bohdan Medwidsky Ukrainian Folklore Archives* at the *Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore*. Most recently, there has been the relatively large task of creating an organizational system for the data collected. This has been possible thanks to the hosting capabilities and support of TAPoR – the *Text Analysis Portal for Research* at the University of Alberta. The eventual *Local Culture* infrastructure within TAPoR will resemble the following: a series of organizational folders containing all of the raw data collected for the project, any relevant administrative information, and a search engine which powers the on-line database.

In the spring of 2006, the *Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore* was approached by the *Canadian Centre for Ethnomusicology* at the University of Alberta and asked to participate in a project entitled the *Virtual Museum of Canadian Traditional Music*. The intention was to create an on-line experience, based on musical information collected in the *Local Culture* project, as one of many “storylines” representing Canadian traditional music. This presented the perfect opportunity to mine the raw data of the *Local Culture* project, with a specific focus. What resulted was a geographical narrative about music, which is a virtual drive through the *Local Culture* soundscape.

The first step was to search the *Local Culture* project indexes for questions relating to music. This process was facilitated by a basic search tool for the Method 1 interviews developed by Dr. Peter Holloway, a member of the Centre. The theory behind this search tool was to take the index as a starting point, use the questions and corresponding time codes, and essentially break up the interview into small bits. Keywords, used as

search criteria, were then identified and connected to the relevant sound segments. However, Method 2 and 3 interviews had to be searched more or less manually, identifying the time codes related to topics on music within the index, choosing those that were longer than a minute (assuming those would be fuller answers) and listening to the corresponding sound files one by one. Thankfully, by using Windows Media Player, it was possible to simply scroll to the desired starting time code without having to listen from the beginning of the interview. Furthermore, as this was intended to be an interactive and visual on-line presentation, suitable accompanying historical photos were chosen by printing out contact sheets of all the photo folders and doing a manual scan for appropriate images. A database of this information was created, including relevant biographical information from the *Local Culture* master log. The end result of this mini-project can be observed at: <http://www.fwalive.ualberta.ca/vmctm/en/html/narratives.php?id=5>)

In the near future, people from around the world will be able to visit the *Local Culture* website and have access to hours of interviews on Canadian history and folklore topics. The interview indexes for the more than a thousand Method 1 interviews provide basic search capabilities, and when coupled with an eventual keyword searching option, the researcher will be able to simply click on a keyword, then click on a related recording, and the sound file will begin to play from the desired topic.

NOTES

1 We express our gratitude to the Department of Canadian Heritage; Multiculturalism Program, the Community Initiatives Programme of the Government of Alberta, the Institut pour le patrimoine de la francophonie de l'Ouest canadien, Faculté Saint-Jean at the University of Alberta, Fédération des Ainé(e)s Francophones de l'Alberta, Department of Women's Studies at the University of Winnipeg, Chair of German-Canadian Studies at the University of Winnipeg, Ukrainian Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko, Ukrainian Pioneers' Association of Alberta, the Chair for Canadian Ethnic Studies at the University of Calgary and the TAPoR Project of the University of Alberta for their support of the project "Local Culture and Diversity on the Prairies." Project participants include Andriy Nahachewsky as principal investigator, Pauline Atwood, Radomir Bilash, Andriy Chernevych, Phillis Dalley, Michelle Daveluy, Nadya

Foty, Michel Fournier, Alexander Freund, Pauline Greenhill, Jen Haddad, Leslie Hall, Madeleine Kalbach, Christine Kampen, Serhiy Kozakov, Anna Kuranicheva, Doris LaChance, Genia McLeod, Frank McMahon, Mike Mikulak, Meredith Pilling, Ryan Rosler, Matt Scalena, Simon Tessier, Angela Thiessen, Theresa Warenycia, Volodymyr Yahnyshchak and some 800 interviewees from across the prairie provinces. Thanks also to the Society of Friends of the Ukrainian Folklore Centre for their support and management of the project.

2 Each of these four groups shares a significant presence in the Canadian prairies, with large populations established prior to the First World War and substantial secondary immigration in the interwar period. “Ethnic identity” is defined very broadly for this project to include affiliation with any particular ethno-cultural sub-group within the larger prairie population. The term “ethnic group” is more often ascribed to Germans and Ukrainians than to English or French communities in Canada. Significant for us however, is that (im)migrants with all of these heritages were certainly conscious of cultural differences between their place of origin and their current community on the Canadian prairies. They all experienced many moments of identity negotiation and options for integration and community building.

3 Many other challenges have been raised. See Lummis 1998 for a related discussion.

4 A multitude of interpersonal factors affecting interviews have been raised by feminist ethnographers, cf. Tower Hollis, Pershing and Young 1993; and many others.

5 See, for example, Agar 1980: 41-62; Spradley 1979: 45-55; as well as numerous more recent discussions of “reflexivity.”

6 This may be particularly significant in ethnic research, where an interviewee may emphasize ethnic traditions or symbols for an interviewer who is assumed to be searching for ethnicity. Researchers in the Ukrainian Folklore Centre are quite familiar with potential interviewees suggesting “I’m not Ukrainian enough for you.” Nobody declined “because I’m too Ukrainian for you.” This suggests that interviewees had pre-conceived notions about our interest in preservation of Ukrainian culture right from the moment of introduction. In the “Local Culture” project however, we are just as eager to hear from people with little engagement with ethnicity as those with a lot.

7 Bernard 1995: 136-359; Bernard 1998: 259-546

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agar, Michael. 1980. *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Lummis, Trevor. 1998. "Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence." In *The Oral History Reader*, 273-283. Edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London: Routledge.
- Bernard, H. Russell. 1995. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Bernard, H. Russell. editor. 1998. *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Tower Hollis, Susan, Linda Pershing and M. Jane Young, (Editors). 1993. *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Appendix 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1. RESPONDENT

- What is your name?
- When and where were you born?
- Where did you grow up? (places and dates)
- When did your family come to Canada?
- When did your family move to [locality]?
- Where was your father born? (village/town, province, country)
- Where was your mother born? (village/town, province, country)
- Where was your spouse born? (village/town, province, country)
- What other places have you lived? When?
- What kind of schooling did you have?
- What kinds of work have you done?
- Who did you live with when you were growing up?
- What is your ancestry?

At this point, you should determine the time frame that you want the interviewee focus on: e.g., if the person was born in the early twenties, ask him/her to recall the childhood and early teen years.

Part 2. MATERIAL CULTURE

- What did you eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner?
- What special meals did you have on Christmas?
- What food did your family purchase at the store?
- What food did your family produce on their own?
- What kind of clothing did you wear?

What chores were you responsible for as a child?
 What did your father do on work days?
 What did your mother do on work days?
 How was your house decorated?
 Did anybody in your family do crafts? What were they?

Part 3: RITUAL ACTIVITIES

Was your family religious? Did you belong to a church? How often did you attend?
 Describe Christmas in your family. When did you celebrate it?
 Describe Easter in your family.
 U - Did anyone in your family make Easter eggs?
 F – Did your family decorate Christmas trees?
 E – Did your family have afternoon tea?
 G – Can you identify ritual activities that only Germans practiced?
 Did you celebrate/observe the following:
 3a. Birthdays
 3b. Dominion (Canada) Day
 3c. Thanksgiving
 3d. Halloween
 3e. New Year's
 3f. Parish Feast day
 3g. Other holy days
 3h. Other holidays tied to specific cultural identity or specific locality
 3i. Other holidays tied to Canadian identity

Part 4: SONGS AND STORIES

Did anyone in your family sing songs? On what occasions? In what languages?
 Did you sing?
 What kind of stories did you hear or tell? When were they told? How often?

Part 5: PERFORMING ARTS

Did people in your family go to dances? Where were dances held? How often?
 Name the dances.
 Name the musical instruments played.
 What kinds of music did you hear?
 What kinds of music did you make?
 Did anyone in the community put on plays? Who? What kind of plays? Did you ever participate?

Part 6: LANGUAGE

What was your first language or languages?
 What languages did you speak at home?
 What language or languages did the teacher use in school? and the students?
 Did you ever take lessons in any other language? When?

Part 7: SOCIAL LIFE AND PASTIMES

Who were your nearest neighbours?
 Who were your best friends? What activities did you do together?
 Who were your parents' friends?
 Did you play sports? What kinds of sports?

What did you and your family do for entertainment?
What nationalities were there in your community?

Part 8: CLOSURE

Has anyone in your family collected information on family history? Have they produced a written history?

Do you have old photographs that show people and life in your community before the 1940s?

Do you know other people who can remember their life experiences in this community before the 1940s and who I might interview?